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Emerson on Plato: Literary Philosophy, Dialectic, and the Temporality of Thought

Jesse Bailey
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Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato.
Emerson, Plato; or The Philosopher

But it is the fault of our rhetoric that we cannot strongly
state one fact without seeming to belie some other.
Emerson, History

For Emerson, Plato is the quintessential philosopher. I will argue that, to the extent that Emerson wanted his essays to have philosophical depth, he considered his work to be an extension of the work found in Plato's dialogues. Thus, in his relationship to the towering figure of Plato we can discern his understanding of the relation between his literary and philosophical endeavors. When we read his comments on Plato, we find crystallized what *philosophical* work Emerson intended his essays to accomplish. Hence, the reader must be attentive not simply to the explicit *content* of his essays, but also the dialectic *form* of the essays. As we know from the *Phaedrus*, and from the dialogical nature of his writings, for Plato the *techne* of rhetoric is not merely stating factual propositions, but more importantly consists in knowing and guiding the souls of one's listeners.

*Emerson sees
his work as
extension of
Plato's.*

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Emerson's
writings not
"obscure" but
reflective of
dialectical
nature of
thought.

The same is certainly true of Emerson's own work.

I will argue that the dialogical character of Plato's works and the obscurity and tension in much of Emerson's writings arise from a recognition of the fluid and dialectical character of living, human thought. Emerson sought to draw the reader into *participation* in his thinking through the superfluity and excess of meaning present in his essays—an excess that philosophical commentators on the essays have found maddening, and even the sign of an inferior mind. I will argue that Emerson uses language ambiguously in much the way Plato constructed his dialogues in order to demand that the reader take an *active* role in the process of thought. For Emerson, truly great philosophy has this "literary" quality of semantic excess which makes demands of the reader—rather than simply and clearly stating a position to be memorized.¹ Further, I will argue that the dialectical structure of their writings was necessary for these two thinkers to speak to diverse audiences at many different levels of sophistication and philosophical development. Their literary style thus reflects their under-

¹ This account of how to approach the dialogues is well-attested, but certainly not universally acknowledged. This, however, is not the venue to fully defend it. On the importance of attention to the "literary" and dramatic elements of the dialogues, and of the necessity of allowing oneself to be "drawn into" the conversation, see Jacob Klein, who writes, for example: ". . . a Platonic dialogue has not taken place if we, the listeners or readers, did not actively participate in it." *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 6. In "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity" (*Classical Antiquity* 5, 1986) David Halperin writes: "By its very form, then, the Platonic dialogue aspires to engage the reader—by inviting his sympathetic identification with the characters and his intellectual participation in their discourse—in a give-and-take, a mutual exchange of ideas, an open-ended discussion. It seeks, in other words, to awaken eros in the reader—to arouse, in particular, his hermeneutic eros, 'the desire of the text.' Or rather, since literary interpretation is but a means to understanding, and no piece of writing in itself is a very serious matter, it would be more accurate to speak of hermeneutic eros in Plato's conception as 'the desire of the idea implicit in a text'—a striving toward something objective. Without such desire or striving or '(counter-)love,' without participating in such a reciprocal exchange, the reader will not be able to interpret a Platonic dialogue and will find it baffling, pointless, incomprehensible" (69). See also John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 3rd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Eva Brann, *The Music of the Republic: Essays on Socrates' Conversations and Plato's Writings* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004), as well as the works of Seth Benardete, Leo Strauss, Harold Bloom, and the "Straussian" school of interpretation.

standing of the *temporality* of the philosophical *life*. These two thinkers composed these great works of literary philosophy not in order to establish abstract doctrines or systems of thought; rather, they wrote in order to invigorate the soul to strive toward truth and virtue.

Emerson and Plato write to inspire the soul, not to establish "abstract doctrines."

I also have a secondary purpose in writing this paper: Emerson mentions Plato *very* frequently in his works. It seems to be the case that, for many readers, the invocation of Plato's name signals a movement to the *transcendental*, to "The Forms" and the eternal and unchanging. In this paper, I will argue that, for Emerson, Plato was a far more complicated figure than is captured in this reading.

Despite these frequent references to Plato, both in his published works and throughout his journals, I will be focusing very narrowly on his essay on Plato in *Representative Men*, because it is here that Emerson's relation to the complicated nature of the figure of Plato is most clear.

I

Emerson begins his hyperbolic praise of Plato by emphasizing the *totality* of Plato's works; he treats them as all encompassing, saying that the value of all books lies in the pages of the dialogues. He calls Plato the "exhausting generalizer" and implies that the history of thought since is merely footnotes to Plato, since "it is fair to credit the broadest generalizer with all the particulars *deducible* from his *thesis*" (289, emphasis added).² My first task, then, is to clarify the nature of the "totality" which Emerson found in Plato, what constitutes this act of generalization, and what Emerson sees as the work of "deducing" the particulars from his "thesis." These words do not have the ordinary, mathematical meaning in Emerson's use. Rather, I will show that Emerson makes much of the fact that Plato presented us not simply with a set of *arguments* or *theories*, but rather with the life and character of Socrates. Plato and Emerson are more concerned with the character, comportment, and mode of life of the philosopher, not simply what theories she might subscribe to at any given time. It is the quality of *life* that is the proper ground on which to stand—as

Both thinkers' philosophies share deeply concern about individual character.

² All quotations come from *The Oxford Authors: Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Richard Poirier (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

To be genuine,
philosophy
must shape
practical life
and politics.

the proper, literally, *hypo-thesis*, of the philosopher. Emerson seeks, through his style of writing, to remind us of the danger of keeping our work as philosophers and theorists sterilized of our concerns as living, politically involved human beings.

Emerson makes this charge very clear to us: if we are to be readers of Plato, we must ourselves be philosophers. We will come to see that the very act of reading Plato or Emerson is the act of engaging in philosophical thinking, but this charge goes even beyond this; Emerson speaks of the life of Plato as accessible only in his works. He says, wonderfully, "Great geniuses have the shortest biographies. Their cousins can tell you nothing about them." Emerson tells us of these geniuses that if we "would know their tastes and complexions, the most admiring of their readers most resembles them" (290-291). This is, again, a seemingly off-hand comment, but it speaks volumes. If *we* are to be among the "most admiring" of Plato's readers, or of Emerson's, we must live as they do, share their "tastes and complexions," and model in our own lives the life of the genius.

As we approach the rarified discussion of the "intellectual" aspects of Emerson's take on Plato, we must keep in mind the goal of this thinking that makes Plato, even without extensive biography, the "representative of philosophy." That is, we must keep in mind that the balance of thinking Emerson calls for leads to a balanced *life*. We will see that the reader of whom Emerson says in the essay *History*, "What Plato has thought, he may think" (113) is a reader who embraces the examined life, dedicates himself (with moderation) to the education of the *polis* as he and his teacher did, and not merely one who writes esoteric books on Plato's "doctrine."

Returning to the question at hand, and the "generality" that Emerson praises in Plato, Emerson claims that Plato's works have a "perpetual modernness," the ability to speak to people of all eras. Emerson explains this by saying that Plato "was not misled by any thing short-lived or local, but *abode* by real and *abiding* traits" (291, emphasis added). He immediately follows this comment by himself posing the question of "How Plato came thus to be Europe, and philosophy," indicating that the question of Plato's "abiding" influence is a result of his connecting to himself "abiding" traits; this might seem

a rather common answer, but with Emerson, unlike many (other) religiously minded thinkers, this does not stand as an answer, *but as the opening of a question*. The “abiding”—not simply the *eternal*—aspects of existence are not the close of a question. We are not to presume what this word “abiding” means, but to find in Plato the opening of the question of that which abides. The doubling of the verb “to abide” further indicates that this question of the “abiding traits” is precisely, as we indicated above, a question of where we *live*, or where we have always lived, or, where we *should* always *strive* to live. To put it clearly: We must be careful not to too readily consider the “religious” connotations of this term definitive. This is not to say that such a reading can be discounted; rather, we must note that the semantic excess, so characteristic of Emerson’s work, is certainly present here.³

Immediately after posing this question of Plato’s abiding influence, Emerson presents us with an odd paragraph. He makes a reference to the necessity of character in the one who abides in the abiding; he says it could not happen without a certain “soundness,” a “sincere and catholic” character, which is “able to honor, at the same time, the ideal, or law of the mind, and fate, or the order of nature” (292). I will simply note this *double* character here; the meaning of this duality, the relation between it and the general unity of Plato’s vision, and that the practical effects of this “at the same time” are central to my argument and will be fleshed-out below.

Emerson then begins a strange and lengthy example as a further introduction to the essence of Plato’s genius. He speaks of a symmetry between the development of a *nation* and that of an *individual*. In both, he tells us, there is a movement, a teleological progress of development from “blind force” to “accuracy, to skill, to truth” (*ibid.*). He speaks of the progress from childhood to adulthood. At first, children can only express their desires and complaints with the force of inarticulate screams and cries; later in childhood they develop the ability to “speak and tell their want and reason of it” whence they become “gentle” (*ibid.*). This is true of adults as well:

... whilst the perceptions are obtuse, men and women talk vehemently and superlatively, blunder and quarrel: their man-

*Emerson in
agreement
with Plato’s
philosophical
anthropology.*

³ This is what Poirier refers to as the “superfluity” in Emerson’s language.

ners are full of *desperation*; their speech is full of oaths. As soon, with culture, things have cleared up a little, and they see them no longer in lumps and masses but accurately distributed, they desist from that weak vehemence and explain their meaning in detail. (292, emphasis added)

He then attributes this ability to communicate to the very nature of human being, saying we would still be animals had the tongue not been “framed for articulation.” Emerson thus connects this development of the skill of communication, and the proper “perception,” “articulation,” “clarity,” and “distribution” on which this communication is based, to the development of one’s essential being as human. This development is further linked to development out of the “desperation” and the violent, oath-bearing shows of force which result from the reasons and nature of desire being *unexamined* and hidden to the agent. Further, he connects this ability to communicate to our lives in the *polis*, stating that once people meet someone who can “assist their volcanic estate, and good communication being established, they are thenceforward good *citizens*” (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

Emerson then goes on to speak of this desperation as the source of the loneliness of “ardent young men and women” who “sigh and weep, write verses and walk alone,” feeling “I have never met with anyone who comprehends me” (*ibid.*). Emerson is building toward his statement of the essence of Plato’s genius. He will, on the next page, speak of this “accuracy and intelligence” in dividing and defining as this essence: “This dividing is philosophy,” he will say, so why this personal interlude? Why the reference to citizenship, desperate and vehement oaths, and the weeping of poetically inclined youths? Why, we might also ask, do we meet citizens both good and bad, men hell-bent on fulfilling their pious duty, and desperate youths in the dialogues?

There is no simple answer to this question—this decision on the part of the philosophers affects us differently in our personal lives and in our scholarly work, differently in our activism in the community and in our teaching, as well as differently at different times in our lives. For our purposes here, this decision serves to frame the issue of the essence of philosophy as he will immediately reveal it: “to define.” What could be in

greater danger of seeming to sap the life-blood from thinking? For Plato's part, we need only look at the traditional scholarship to see that no other thinker is more in need of reviving. Ironically, no thinker than the one repeatedly accused of ignoring this world where we live and die, placing truth in an eternal "beyond," has better explained through his ideas the importance of how we choose to live our lives in the very world that he ostensibly ignored. Similarly, no thinker more than the one repeatedly accused of banishing poetry found it necessary to frame his ideas in so poetic a way. In his prose, Emerson reminds us of the *literary dimensions of Plato's work*; he thereby reminds us of the way the "poetic" dimensions of texts can keep philosophy vibrant and firmly grounded in our lives.

*To define is
the essence of
philosophy.*

With these preliminary remarks out of the way, but kept in mind as framing the following discussion, we can now turn to Emerson's account of the heart of Plato's genius.

II

"At last comes Plato, the distributor, who needs no barbaric paint, or tattoo, or whooping; for he can define" (292). Emerson introduces what he takes to be the heart of Plato's thought by loosely quoting from the *Phaedrus*, "'He shall be as a god to me, who can rightly divide and define'" (ibid.). Already in using this quote he has indicated the double character of philosophy—to divide as well as to define.⁴ "Philosophy is the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world. Two cardinal facts lie *forever* at the base; the one and the two.—1. Unity, or Identity; and 2. Variety" (ibid., emphasis added). In this quote, in the word "forever," we see that we are beginning to touch on the abiding—and it is not the eternal soul, but a structural fact lying at the base of *either* thinking or the world itself. The passage leaves it unclear: it could lie at the base of the "constitution of the world," or at the base of philosophy, or perhaps the place where they meet. Emerson does not answer this question, wisely, and we will return to see how his work plays the poles of this quintessential philosophical problem against one another.

Expounding on this duality, Emerson continues: "We unite

⁴ We should note, of course, that to "define" also carries this duality. It can equally well mean to make distinctions and to gather the many into a one.

For Emerson,
Plato's
philosophy
combines
the unity
characteristic
of Asian
thought with
the attention
to detail
characteristic
of the Euro-
pean.

all things by perceiving the law which pervades them; by perceiving the superficial differences and the profound resemblances. But every mental act,—this very perception of identity or oneness, recognizes the difference of things. Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak or to think without embracing both" (293). With this statement, Emerson is revealing the double-character which he takes to be the essence of Plato's work. With Plato, "In short, a balanced soul was born, perceptive of the two elements" (ibid.). He speaks of the power of division as lying in the province of Europe, and its practical sciences, and of the tendency toward unification as the virtue of Asian thought. Plato, of course, stands at the balance point between East and West: "The unity of Asia and the detail of Europe; the infinitude of the Asiatic soul and the defining, result-loving, machine-making, surface-seeking, opera-going Europe—Plato came to join, and, by contact, to enhance the energy of each. The excellence of Europe and Asia are in his brain" (293).

Emerson describes the movement toward unity with characteristically transcendental language; he describes this movement of thought as progressing towards "causes," a tendency of thought to find "ones," and to strive toward discovery of single causes of multiple appearances:

The mind is urged to ask for one cause of many effects; then for the cause of that; and again the cause, diving still into the profound: self-assured that it shall arrive at an absolute and sufficient one,- a one that shall be all. "In the midst of the sun is the light, in the midst of the light is truth, and in the midst of truth is the imperishable being," say the Vedas. All philosophy, of East and West, has the same centripetence. (293)

He uses language from the "Indian Scriptures," including the Vedas and the *Bhagavad-Gita* to describe this movement, quoting from these texts for the length of an entire page; his intent, in pulling from texts which Plato would certainly have no access to, is to begin to flesh-out the universal nature of this tendency of thought toward unity: "In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity" (293). His rhetoric here of the work toward Unity being the "same" in Plato, in Hindu texts, and indeed in all thought is *performative* of this tendency of thought to look past difference toward commonalities, and toward unity:

"The Same, the Same: friend and foe are of one stuff; the ploughman, the plough and the furrow are of one stuff; and the stuff is such and so much that the variations of form are unimportant" (ibid.). Scholars might want to quibble with calling Plato's *to hen* (The One), or *to agathon* (The Good) "the same" as *Brahman*, despite the obvious similarities; but when working at the "level" at which the ploughman, the plough, and the furrow are all One, these scholarly distinctions are unimportant. The differences are washed away in the ascent to Unity in this temperament of thought—and as we will see, these differences are *existentially* unimportant to the insight Emerson is calling for.

Of course, this tendency is balanced by its "opposite" tendency toward division, manyness: "If speculation tends thus to a terrific unity, in which all things are absorbed, action tends directly backwards to diversity" (294). He characterizes this turn to diversity as the province of action, and "Nature": a term which obviously has enormous import for Emerson's work. He continues: "The first [unity] is the course or gravitation of mind; the second [diversity] is the power of nature. Nature is the manifold. The unity absorbs, and melts or reduces. Nature opens and creates. These two principles reappear and interpenetrate all things, all thought; the one, the many" (ibid.). At this point we will just note the fact that it is in turning to *action* that the tendency of thought is driven to discover diversity and manyness; we will return to this point at length later.

It is notable that Emerson describes the tendency toward unity as a tendency of "mind" as opposed to the tendency of nature, while *at the same time* stating that both tendencies interpenetrate "all thought." This ambiguity brings to mind the structurally similar ambiguity we noted above with reference to the "two cardinal facts" which lie at the base of *either* philosophy, as the account of the world, or at the base of "the constitution of the world."⁵ When trying to decide where Emerson places "mind" in relation to nature, we are faced with

In Emerson's mind, unity is balanced by diversity; each complements rather than opposes the other.

⁵ At the time of introducing this ambiguity, we noted that Emerson says these two cardinal facts lie "forever" at the base; to remind us now, this indicates that this ambiguity which we are encountering again is connected, by this "forever," to whatever is "abiding" in life which Plato was able to contact, thus spawning his perennial influence and genius.

the “same” problem, here presented at a deeper level of complexity, providing two “options for interpretation.” One option says that *mind*, tending toward unity, is in tension with its opposite, nature, which tends toward diversity. The other option says that both tendencies “interpenetrate thought.” Since thought has both tendencies *within it*, we must also speak of the realm of thought as containing both “cardinal facts,” thus the tendencies of “mind” and nature would now lie within the scope of “thought.” If this latter option of interpretation proves to be the case, we could then exclaim, quoting from “Experience”: “Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself. The subject exists, the subject enlarges; all things sooner or later fall into place. As I am, so I see; use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are” (231).

When this ambiguity first appeared above, it was simply a question of “idealism” vs. “realism”: i.e., does the dual-nature of thought come from the “constitution of the world,” or is it a product of our philosophy imposed upon the world? Here, however, there is another level to consider: The unity striven for by the one tendency of thought appears, in the first of the options of interpretation, to be counter to the world itself, i.e., to be an “ideal” imposed on the “real” manyness of phenomena. In the latter option for interpretation *both possibilities of the earlier dilemma are contained within “the subject.”*

That is, in the second option for interpretation of this second ambiguity, *both* the conception of the “external” or “real” world *as nature* driving us toward diversity, *and* the conception of thought *itself* possessing this tendency “interpenetrate all thought.” As we quoted above, Emerson insists that “every mental act,—*this very perception of identity or oneness, recognizes the difference of things*. Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak or to think without embracing both” (293, emphasis added). Here, the two tendencies are not pictured as in opposition, but actually as creative of one another; that is, he claims that it is in the “very perception of identity” that we recognize difference.

It appears, then, that there is no founding ambiguity between our philosophy and the “constitution of the world,” since they co-constitute thinking, and insisting on either as the

“proper basis” of the two cardinal facts is itself an “accident” of “temperament.” Emerson says: “Each student adheres, by temperament and by habit, to the first or to the second of these gods of the mind. By religion, he tends to unity; by intellect, or by the senses, to the many” (294).⁶ The tender-minded temperament of Unity would insist that both the world and thought share this structure—that both lie firmly grounded in the structure of a “reality” which exceeds the distinction between mind and world. The hard-minded temperament of diversity insists that the mind seeks unities which are not present in the “constitution of the world,” imposes these on experience, breaking off the sharp edges of the square pegs of experience to fit it into the round hole of the ideal vision of the world. Both temperaments, without necessarily being aware of it, locate the very *issue* of grounding the “two cardinal facts” solidly in thought, interpenetrating it, being synonymous with it *as* its temperament.

According to Emerson, philosophy and the world “co-constitute thinking.”

This second option for interpretation seems to be the one most warranted by the text, since it is the option which would allow the text to be carefully written and the ambiguity to be intentional rather than careless. However, it does not allow us to get “behind” experience and locate the “cardinal facts” as either an imposition on the world or in the world itself, since to make this decision would demand that we step outside of thought to check this tendency against the structure of the world *outside experience*. Further, we know that, since, for Emerson, Plato is philosophy and Plato is the thinker who has found a *balance* between these tendencies, the apparent contradiction between these two modes/temperaments of thought must be false. Thus, the demand that we decide, in our philosophy, between “idealism” and “realism” (in the limited senses presented here, as locating the “two cardinal facts” solely in our philosophy or in the world, respectively) is a demand that we need not answer conclusively—they must remain “live” options.

Emerson’s ambiguous style is deliberate rather than evidence of imprecise thinking.

On what basis would we decide between “idealism” and “realism” as readings of Emerson? I hold that a careful reading of the essays of Emerson, as well as of this essay in partic-

⁶ It is interesting to note the influence on William James here.

To label
Emerson an
"idealist" or
a "realist"
reflects
misunder-
standing of
the dialectical
nature of his
thought.

ular, will find no solution that simply falls into either side of the aporetic "dilemma," save the one that satisfies a given reader at a given time who, finding herself in the text, ends the reading when her own opinions are confirmed. His texts insist that we accept this ambiguity, that we learn to navigate and balance this "sliding scale" of consciousness; they insist that we consider the dilemma, and do not too readily commit to either side, since to read this and other essays well demands that we hold both to be live options. Before we make any decision about this ambiguity, and its relation to the *dialectic* character of thought for Plato, and thus (on Emerson's account) of philosophy, we have to attend more closely to this doubleness itself, and ask: what is the balance that Plato represents?

III

In order to deepen our understanding of this duality, and the dialectic that Emerson and Plato take to be central to philosophy and to life, we will turn away from Emerson's explicit work on Plato, and attend to the dialectical structure that appears in several of his essays, especially "History."

"History" begins boldly: "There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. . . What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has be-fallen any man, he can understand" (113). This is a hyperbolic claim which clearly invites skepticism. Is it really possible to think what Plato has thought? Certainly I will never know the suffering of a saint. Does Emerson, then, completely discount what we experience as the basis of what we can know, what we can feel? Certainly our era, society, and upbringing play some role that problematizes this access to the "universal mind." In these opening lines Emerson makes an unbelievably bold claim, which seems startlingly naïve.

However, by the second-to-last page of the essay, we find Emerson saying,

A mind might ponder its thought for ages, and not gain so much self-knowledge as the passion of love shall teach it in a day. Who knows himself before he has been thrilled with indignation at an outrage, or has heard an eloquent tongue, or has shared the throb of thousands in a national exultation or alarm? *No man can antedate his experience*, or guess what faculty

or feeling a new object shall unlock, any more than he can draw to-day the face of a person whom he shall see to-morrow for the first time. (128, emphasis added)

What has happened between these two moments in the essay? We do not have the time to go into a careful analysis of the text, but upon encountering this line the reader is struck with the stark contrast to the first lines. In returning to the opening of the essay, one finds hints to this other “pole” of Emerson’s presentation of our thoughtful relation to history throughout the essay. This is certainly a carefully crafted duality and ambiguity. It is impossible to ignore either pole in reading the essay, and as such, *the reader is called into a space of thinking bordered on one side by the absolute difference between all people, and on the other by what makes us one.* The essay works *dialectically*.

Emerson has traditionally been deemed a “poet” rather than a “philosopher”—one finds his essays in the library next to Butler and Yeats, not James, Hegel, or Plato.⁷ It begins to be clear why more traditionally tough-minded thinkers find this ambiguity exasperating. However, a careful reader is on guard against frustration. One should not expect Emerson to settle arguments if one takes his equation of Plato with philosophy as a guide. The dialogues force one to consider the wealth of a text not simply in the proofs it offers or the arguments it makes, but also in the questions that it poses.

Consider this passage from *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* by David Robinson: “The tensions in Emerson’s thought are apparent when one attempts to specify his intellectual position

Emerson is difficult to understand when readers expect conventional “academic” philosophy.

Emerson does not tell the reader what to think but shows the reader a way of thinking.

⁷ Consider this passage from Doug Anderson’s *Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006): “In an essay in 1876 O. B. Frothingham maintained: ‘Mr. Emerson’s place is among poetic, not philosophic minds. He belongs to the order of imaginative men. The imagination is his organ.’ A bit later George Edward Woodberry asserted that ‘Emerson, as has been said, was fundamentally a poet with an imperfect faculty of expression.’ And more recently Charles Fiedelson, Jr., while acknowledging Emerson’s attempt at philosophy, argues that Emerson’s ‘theory has weight chiefly as a literary program . . .’ Insofar as these merely describe Emerson’s writing, they are of course in part true. Emerson did intend to argue for the role of the poetic in ascertaining and disseminating wisdom and character as is clearly evidenced in ‘The Poet.’ However, he did not mean that mere poetry would suffice; Emerson shared with Plato a concern for the poet’s ignorance of her own wisdom. . .” (118).

Emerson's
ambiguity
reminds one
of Nietzsche.

in a given essay, but to write such an essay off as contradictory misses a larger value, its ability to take the reader into an exemplary act of thinking."⁸ It is, as should be clear by now, the purpose of this paper to understand the abiding structure of any "act of thinking" which Emerson would call "philosophical," and into which he would seek to draw his readers.

Returning to "History," we find that after Emerson insists that experience marks the limits of what a person can think (thereby fully explicating the dialectic tension in the essay) Emerson writes: "Let it suffice that in light of these two facts, namely, that the mind is One, and that nature is its *correlative*, history is to be read and written" (129, emphasis added). We saw above, in connection with the essay on Plato, the difficulties present in deciding what might be meant here by "correlative." But what matters for our purposes here is that we get a sense for the productive nature of this unresolved tension. Immediately after invoking these two facts here, Emerson says that we are concerned with *how* we shall read and write history. One is certainly reminded of Nietzsche's work *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*, when Emerson places the focus of our attention to history on its effects on life

⁸ David Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12. Robinson and Anderson are certainly not alone in recognizing the dialectical character of Emerson's essays. The classic example of the identification of the importance of dialectic for Emerson's prose style was made by W. T. Harris in 1884: "Emerson has furnished us with many very wonderful examples of dialectic treatment of his subject. . . . The object of his writing was to present truth, and produce insight, and not to make proselytes" ("The Dialectic Unity in Emerson's Prose," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 2 [April, 1884], 196). See Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1985). Carton argues that Emerson, in his prose, creates what he calls an "Emersonian double-consciousness," by incorporating "affirmation and denial" in order to subvert any simple access to its meaning (25). His work thus "shadows its own claims with critical counterclaims" (26). See also Steven Railton, "Seeing & Saying: The Dialectic of Emerson's Eloquence," in *Emerson and His Legacy: Essays in Honor of Quentin Anderson*, ed. Stephen Donadio (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986); R. A. Yoder, "Emerson's Dialectic," *Criticism*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Fall 1969), 313-328; Walter Blair and Clarence Faust, "Emerson's Literary Method," *Modern Philology* 42 (1944), 79-95; Paul Sherman, *Emerson's Angle of Vision* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), 112-19; Gustaaf van Cromphout, "Emerson and the Dialectics of History," *PMLA*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (January 1976), 54-65, et al.

as he continues:

Thus in all ways does the soul concentrate and reproduce its treasures for each pupil. He, too, shall pass through the whole cycle of experience. He shall collect into a focus the rays of nature. History no longer shall be a dull book. *It shall walk incarnate in every just and wise man.* You shall not tell me by languages and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived. A man shall be the Temple of Fame. He shall walk, as the poets have described that goddess, in a robe painted all over with wonderful events and experiences. (129, emphasis added)

With this beautiful, grandiloquent language Emerson begins to bring his essay to a close. We can see why this would be off-putting to the traditional philosophical mind, especially as it has appeared in America.

To modern readers there seems to be something excessive in this claim. This is intentional, as Emerson indicates, when he brilliantly continues, opening the next paragraph: "Is there somewhat overweening in this claim? Then I reject all I have written, for what is the use of pretending to know what we know not? *But it is the fault of our rhetoric that we cannot strongly state one fact without seeming to belie some other*" (129, emphasis added). Here, we begin to see the real spirit behind these grand turns of phrase, and the way we can begin to understand how Emerson can present conflicting viewpoints, not just as pedagogical tools, *but because he really holds them as valuable ways to approach the world and the self.* As he says in the essay "Self-Reliance": "The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our *past* act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our *past* acts, and we are loath to disappoint them" (136, emphasis added). *How* can we hold conflicting opinions? How can Emerson claim (seemingly) contradictory truths in different essays, and even within the same essay, *and even as the structural basis of a single essay*, and not appear to us to be incapable of the intellectual subtlety necessary to unravel the ambiguity into a clear formulation? As this quote indicates, he introduces the variable of *time*; it is our *past* acts that we feel we must hold to, and which then stifles our creativity, and our growth:

But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why

drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity: yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and color. Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee. (Self-Reliance, 136)

This passage is, of course, immediately followed by one of the most famous from Emerson's work:

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.' Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. (Self-Reliance, 137)

*For Emerson,
as for Plato, to
live well takes
a lifetime;
hence no one
set of abstract
principles can
serve us
adequately
over that
entire span.*

Thus the very structure of his essays comes to mirror the multiplicity of opinion that Emerson feels is necessary to *live well*. To live well is a matter that takes *time*—in fact it takes no less time than the span of a life, and there is no short-cut; in that time, there is no reason to expect that one set of principles will serve us to live well for that entire span.⁹ The same is certainly true of Plato; in the *Republic*, Glaucon says that the proper "measure" for listening to philosophy "is a whole life" (450b). One might go further, in fact, and add that for Emerson and Plato it is precisely seeking a simple formulation of some one eternal set of rules or Truths that stifles our lives and our thinking. Why should the truths of the world, concerning what beliefs and values are necessary for life, *not* contradict? Why

⁹ Yoder argues that to enter into Emerson's "inner life" is to follow "the conflicts and changes in his thinking." Emerson's "inner process tells us something important about the outer product, the works Emerson published during his life. It is easier now, to understand why the essays do not submit to paraphrase or summary: the vitality of the inner life shows more clearly that ordinary logic would not serve Emerson's purpose. . ." (1969, 313).

expect the values that guide us today to last a lifetime? Emerson looks at the world, looks at the span of life, and finds *superfluity*. No one articulation can hope to capture the truths of the Spirit. If it is the case that this “greatness” that Emerson speaks of is the ability to balance seeming contradictions, then living with “both” aspects is a precondition to seeing the abiding basis in which they no longer appear to “believe” one another, to simply negate the other without remainder. For Emerson, this is, as quoted above, a “fault of our rhetoric.”

*Desire for
definitive
philosophical
doctrines
undermines
thought and
distorts nature
of human
existence.*

Again, Emerson finds the abiding not in *what* is thought, but in the *structure* and *movement* of thought—in its dual nature, which causes not stasis, but the dynamic movement between unity and diversity that forms, in a *palintropos harmonia*, the very abiding, dialectical essence of thought. It is this understanding of the “abiding” that informs his literary style, and the dialectic structure of the essays.

Conclusion

I have shown above that, for Emerson, the essence of philosophy as seen in Plato is the ability to “abide in the abiding.” This abiding element is discovered not in the composition of the soul, nor in some simply “metaphysical” truth lying “in the heavens or beneath the earth”; rather, the abiding is found in what lies “forever at the base” of thinking and of the world, in their “correlation” and interpenetration. This abiding basis is double in nature, and has a tense, oppositional structure—with truth seeming to most minds to appear on one side or the other, depending upon the temperament of the person declaring: “true!” Plato’s genius was in seeing *both* aspects, despite apparent contradiction, in their workings within “every mental act.”

The genius of Plato’s work is thus revealed in the *literary* dimensions of the dialogue structure, by which Plato draws the reader into a participation in the movement and life of thinking. It is this ability to inspire and engage in the movements of thought that Emerson so admired in The Philosopher, and which he sought to mimic in his own literary works. Thus, we can see that the name “Plato,” as it appears in the essays, means much more than the simple, unidirectional ascent to the

*Genius of
Emerson and
Plato found in
their dialogic
style inviting
the reader to
participate in
thinking.*

transcendent (though we are not surprised to find Emerson, as a “transcendentalist,” marking the path to Unity frequently and with great enthusiasm). It was Plato who most symbolizes the understanding of the connection between the written word, philosophy, and *life*. Specifically, I have shown how Emerson’s prose style flows from his understanding of the temporality of human life. Plato and Emerson wanted to write for the ages, for people of different levels of sophistication and at different stages of life. Thus, their work cannot simply be taken as “true” propositions for us to memorize; they sought to draw us into a space of thinking marked by the dual nature of the abiding basis of thought and life. This is the genius that marks the connection between the literary and philosophical dimensions of these two thinkers.